DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 191 084 CS 205 805

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TITLE The Winthrop College Writing Skills Program: A Model for College-School Cooperation.
PUB DATE Mar 80
NOTE 16p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (31st, Washington, DC, March 13-15, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College School Cooperation: *Educational Assessment: Educational Research: Elementary Secondary Education: Evaluation Criteria: Higher Education: *Minimum Competencies: *Minimum Competency Testing: *Writing Research: *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Writing Evaluation

ABSTRACT

A cooperative writing assessment program between a college and seven public school districts was designed to demonstrate that the writing skills necessary for adequate composing were not those that could be measured by an objective test. The goals of the program were to (1) analyze the rhetorical skills of sixth and eighth grade students, (2) determine which skills are necessary for minimal competency at those levels, and (3) develop a testing method to assess those skills. The first phase of the program, called the research phase, focused on a statistical analysis of errors in writing at the college, eighth grade, and sixth grade levels. The second phase, termed the workshop phase, focused on identifying the rhetorical skills that minimally competent sixth and eighth grade students should possess and on developing an instrument to test those skills. Public school and college teachers participated in workshops to develop lists of minimal skills for grades six and eight and rating sheets to evaluate student writing, and to score student writing and compare their grading standards. The third phase of the program, called the action phase, resulted in a writing network that linked program participants and provided them with a channel for communication. Proposed network projects include production of a writing manual and a network newsletter. (Appended is a statement of the network's rationale, purpose, organization, and committee structure.) (AEA)

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THE WINTHROP COLLEGE WRITING SKILLS PROGRAM: A MODEL FOR COLLEGE-SCHOOL COOPERATION

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THE WINTHROP COLLEGE WRITING SKILLS PROGRAM: A MODEL FOR COLLEGE-SCHOOL COOPERATION

BACKGROUND:

South Carolina joined the bandwagon on competency testing in 1978; however, our legislature uses the term "Basic Skills Assessment." Fortunately, the students' scores are not YET tied to promotion or graduation. The current timetable calls for field-testing the writing tests for 6th and 8th-graders during the Spring of 1980 and administering the first series of tests in Spring 1981.

Because the state English Council had so little input in the planning for this assessment, English teachers and teacher educators feared that an objective test would be used to measure writing ability. The Winthrop College Writing Skills Program was designed to show that the writing skills necessary for adequate composing were not those that could be measured by such a test; Writing student's skills can only be measured by having the student write.

Winthrop College is uniquely suited for a cooperative program between college and public schools because it is a member of a consortium composed of seven local school districts and the college. The Board of Governors meets each month to consider ways in which the schools and the college can work together for their mutual benefit.

THE PROGRAM:

The goals of the Winthrop College Writing Skills Program were

1. To analyze the rhetorical skills of 6th and 8th graders

2. To determine which skills are necessary for minimal competency at these levels

and 3. To develop a testing method to assess these skills.

The implementation of these goals were accomplished in three phases: research, workshop, and action.

The research phase focused on the statistical analysis of errors in writing at the college, eighth, and sixth grade levels. The college writing samples were taken from the Writing Composition Proficiency Examination given to transfer students who want to receive credit for Writing 102 taken at another institution. Fifty of 140 papers which received a passing score and 50 of 99 papers which received a

failing score were selected for analysis. Using a modified version of the Purdue University Scoring Sheet, two English instructors counted the number of errors in mechanics, punctuation, spelling, and grammar per 400 words of writing and also identified major problem areas in paragraph development and overall organization on each examination. Fifteen examinations were discarded in order to avoid scoring more than one examination written by the same student. The 85 remaining writing samples were then analyzed and the number and type of error were correlated with other errors on the examination and with background information which the students supplied on questionnaires which they completed at the time of the examination. The results indicated that most students, even most of those who failed the examination, had an adequate command of grammar and mechanics. Though certain students were obviously deficient in these areas, 81.2 percent wrote papers without sentence fragments, and 72.9 percent avoided errors in subject-verb agreement and pronoun-antecedent agreement.

The problems that most students encountered were with larger rhetorical elements--paragraphing and overall organization and development. Sixty-three point five percent encountered major problems in one or more aspects of paragraph development--for example, in providing sufficient detail within paragraphs to support generalizations. An even greater percentage had major problems with units larger than paragraphs. Major difficulties with transitions between paragraphs showed up on 41.2 percent of the papers, and problems with restriction of topic were evident on 37.6 percent.

As might be expected, there was a high degree of correlation between errors in mechanics and punctuation. Students who tended to make one sort of error, such as spelling, were much more likely to make other basic errors in sentence structure, agreement, case, logic, and diction. [In fact, spelling errors had a higher positive correlation (.59) and probability (P .0001) than other errors when compared with the total number of mechanical and grammatical errors on the papers.] There was also a positive correlation between basic mechanical and punctuation errors and weaknesses in larger rhetorical elements.

In many cases, however, the failing score on the test resulted not from grammatical errors but from major difficulties with paragraphing and with larger rhetorical elements. The cause for this deficiency

may lie in the lack of practice in and concern with these aspects of the composition process. Failing students were less aware of their weakness in these areas and had less experience writing essays of at least 500 words in their WRI 102 course. The analysis of the sample essays and of the questionnaire data suggests that students need more training in paragraphing and especially in larger rhetorical aspects of writing if they are to be expected to write effective multi-paragraph compositions.

Writing samples of 6th and 8th-graders were also analyzed using a modified Purdue University Scoring Sheet with a section on mechanics and correctness but with modified sections on paragraph development and overall organization. There were several problems evident in trying to compare the college and middle school data. For one thing, the college sample was longer and more complex than the task given the sixth and eighth grade students. The college students had to write a 400 word essay in which they argued in support of a position. The public school students were asked only to write a descriptive paragraph. These differences might in part account for the larger number of problem areas in paragraphing and overall organization encountered by the college students. However, the public school sample contained a cross-section of students, including a number who were obviously extremely deficient in writing and who would probably not go on to do college level work. In addition, the sixth and eighth grade papers were selected on the basis of an even distribution of scores from A to F; thus, the school papers analyzed contained a higher percentage of D and F papers. [(40% for 6th grade and 35% for eighth) than did the toal sample of papers.]

Comparison of these sixth and eighth grade papers with the college papers again indicated that the public school children made many more errors in basic sentence grammar and punctuation than did students in the college sample. Sixth and eighth grade students averaged 46.5 mechanical errors per 400 words, three times the number of errors made by the average college transfer student. However, this increase in the frequency of errors was not borne out in other aspects of the composition process. Sixth graders in this sample had on the average 1.16 major problem areas in paragraphing out of a total of 9 (12.9%). Eighth grade

students encountered 1.12 problem areas out of 11 (10.2%). In contrast, college students had problems in a larger percentage of paragraphing skills (1.4 out of 5, or 28%).

When another writing sample on a different topic was tried using written instructions and a visual stimulus, the results indicated a similar low number of problem areas in paragraphing encountered by the public school students. This sample contained 40 randomly selected papers by eighth grade students in the project participants' classes. Sixth grade papers averaged 1.1 out of 9 paragraphing problem areas (12.4%) while eighth grade papers revealed 1.5 average problems out of 11 (16.7%). Papers in this sample exhibited somewhat fewer mechanics, punctuation, grammar, and spelling errors (35.8 per 400 words), but that number was still more than twice the average frequency on the college sample.

One would expect to find sixth and eighth grade writing to be considerably weaker than college level writing in all categories including paragraphing and larger units. This assumption was not borne out. Instead, college students were substantially better in basic spelling, grammar, punctuation, and mechanics, but were no better, and were perhaps even weaker, in paragraphing and larger aspects of composition.

Student performance in all aspects of writing tended to be better at the eighth grade level than at the sixth grade. However, only in basic grammar and mechanics did the college transfer students out-perform the middle school students. One plausible explanation for the apparent lack of improvement from eighth grade to college in paragraphing and rhetoric is that the students may not receive adequate training and practice in these areas in high school and in their college composition courses. Some students may have been able to avoid writing instruction altogether, and others may have taken a course which stressed grammar exercises but did not provide continuing opportunities for students to develop skills in writing paragraph and multi-paragraph compositions.

The research phase of the project concluded that the schools need to place greater emphasis in grades eight through twelve on rhetorical skills.

Phase Two, "workshop," focused on (1) identifying rhetorical skills which minimally competent sixth and eighth grade students should possess and (2) developing an instrument to test these skills. In order to

accomplish these goals, a group of selected sixth and eighth grade English/language arts teachers from the school districts in the surrounding area met with four college professors. (Winthrop College is fortunate in being a member of a consortium of eight school districts which meet together regularly to consider ways in which the schools and the college can work together.)

During the first workshop the group of public school/college teachers reviewed student writing samples provided by a local school district, the preliminary evaluation of these samples by the college personnel, and the curriculum materials that the teachers had brought with them. Based on this data and their own classroom experiences, the participants were able to identify the writing skills a student should have in order to perform adequately at the next grade level.

For Grade Six, the minimal skills were as follows:

1. To write legibly
2. To write a paragraph with these characteristics--
   a. a topic sentence or main idea
   b. two or more sentences giving descriptive details
   c. a concluding or closing sentence
   d. all sentences related to the topic (unity)
   e. first line of the paragraph indented
   f. words spelled well enough to be read
   g. all sentences beginning with capital letters and ending with appropriate punctuation marks.

For Grade Eight, the minimal skills were the same as for the sixth grade, but with the addition of

   a. three, not two, or more sentences giving descriptive details
   b. at least two examples of modification
   c. evidence of some organization of material
   d. complete sentences, having both subject and verb

and e. proper nouns and pronoun "I" capitalized.

At the conclusion of the workshop, the teachers agreed to have their students produce one-paragraph writing samples on a uniform topic. The teachers agreed to assign grades to the papers, without otherwise marking them. The college personnel were to analyze the papers using the modified Purdue Scoring method to gain a clearer sense of the writing skills of sixth and eighth grade students.

Workshop II was concerned with (1) assessing the writing task that the participants had administered to their students following the first workshop, (2) developing a rating sheet for determining minimum competency, and (3) developing a second improved writing task that would be tested on students. During the workshop the modification of the criteria for scoring the writing samples were agreed upon. It was decided that a dichotomous rating sheet would be used by evaluators. For sixth grade writing, the criteria was reduced from 9 to 7 points.

1. Topic Sentence--Main idea acknowledged (added: or implied)
2. Support--2 or more sentences giving descriptive details (no change)
3. Closure--concluding or closing sentence (deleted as not necessary)
4. Unity--All sentences relate to topic (All changed to Most)
5. Form--First line of paragraph deleted (deleted as not necessary)
6. Spelling --words spelled well enough to read easily (no change)
7. Sentence Structure--Sentences complete, having both subject and verb (added after subject: stated or understood)
8. Sentence Form--All sentences begin with capital letters and end with appropriate punctuation (no change)
9. Handwriting--Legible (added: enough to be read easily)

SCORING: A paper receiving five satisfactory evaluations would receive a passing score.

The criteria for paragraphs written by eighth graders were reduced from 11 to 9 points.

1. Topic Sentence--Main Idea acknowledged (added: or implied)
2. Support--3 or more sentences giving descriptive details (changed to: 5 or more sentences of which at least 3 contribute additional information about the topic)
3. Modification--At least 2 examples within paragraph; words or phrases (deleted as separate item and included in item support)
4. Unity--All sentences related to the topic (All changed to Most)
5. Organization--Some evidence of a pattern of organization (no change)
6. Sentence Structure--Sentences are complete, having both subject and verb (added: and communicate clearly)

7. Form--The first line of the paragraph indented (deleted as not necessary)
8. Spelling--Words spelled well enough so that they can be read easily (no change)
9. Sentence Form--All sentences begin with capital letters and end with appropriate punctuation mark (no change)
10. Capitalization--Proper nouns and pronoun "I" (no change)
11. Handwriting--Legible (added: ehough to be read easily)

SCORING: A paper receiving satisfactory evaluations in seven categories would receive a passing score.

Workshop II also developed a second writing task which would elicit more effective writing samples than did the first writing assignment. The participants decided to use a picture as a visual stimulus because it would be more appropriate for marginal students who might have difficulty reading and generating ideas and descriptive details. However, they cautioned against selecting a subject matter which might cause students to rely on slogans and jingles from commercials, a problem encountered with the first writing task: to describe a hamburger. The participants agreed to administer the writing tasks in their classes and to bring them ungraded to the final workshop.

During Workshop III the participants scored selected sixth and eighth grade paragraphs by two different methods: rating sheet and holistic method. To do this, the participants were divided into two groups. Group One scored selected papers using the revised rating sheets developed in Workshop II and Group Two, after a practice session in which they compared grading standards to arrive at a consensus of what constitutes a passing and a failing paragraph, scored selected paragraphs holistically.

Because the agreement between the scores arrived at by the rating sheet and those by the holistic method was so high and because of the relative speed of the process, the participants recommended that holistic scoring be used. They stressed, however, the need for thorough training sessions to insure uniformity, and they recommended that the criteria developed for the rating sheet be used to establish standards for minimal competency during these practice sessions.

Phase Three of the Winthrop College Writing Skills Program was "Action." One of the results of the project was the close, sharing relationship which developed among the participants and between them and the

college faculty involved. The time before the workshop activities began, during the coffee breaks, and at lunch became a time for sharing of problems, of ideas, and of mutual support. As a result of this need to know what others were doing in writing, how successful they had been, and what could be done to motivate students and to handle the vast amount of written work necessary in teaching writing, the participants developed a proposal for a Writing Network that would link them together and would provide a channel for communication among the members of the CYLUC-W Consortium. This proposed network was approved in September and held its first meeting in October, 1979. (See Appendix)

The major purpose of the Writing Network is the improvement of writing instruction in the school districts of the Consortium area. The immediate focus is on the establishment of objectives for evaluating the writing of sixth and eighth grade students, an extension of the WSP. To support these goals, two suggested Network Projects for the first year are (1) production of a "Writing Manual" listing the writing objectives selected by the Writing Committee of the State Department and appropriate testing situations for each object; and (2) publication of a newsletter to be sent to and posted in each school to provide communication between the Writing Liaison Committee and the schools. Presently, the Liaison Committee is working on the writing manual, stressing the rhetorical skills which are often omitted from English textbooks. The publication should be ready for publication in late May or early June, 1980.

The Writing Network developed from the Winthrop College Writing Skills Project is one way in which the college can serve the local school districts and in which the two can work together. The present network liaison committee consists of fourteen classroom teachers (grades 6-8), one school district representative, and four college faculty members (3 from English and 1 from Reading). As the emphasis of the network changes from year to year so will the composition of the network liaison committee. For instance, next year may center around sessions in the individual districts with the local teachers using the strategies developed in the "writing manual." This will help to develop the outer reaches of the network and establish more clearly the chain of communication. Another possibility exists in having the Writing Network prepare a booklet of exercises, suggestions, etc. for parents whose children do not

meet the minimum competency level in writing. This is a condition of the present law. If the Network chooses to pursue this goal, parents, such as members of the school advisory councils would be included. The possibilities are endless. The composition of the network will be flexible enough to allow it to perform many services for the school districts. In addition to the direct service that the Writing Network provides, the members from both the college and the school districts are learning about the problems and expectations of each group. The mutual understanding that results from their close association and their working together to achieve a common goal is of even more benefit. The CYLUC-W Writing Network, therefore, is a model of college-school cooperation which offers endless possibilities for the improvement of writing instruction on all levels.

CYLUC-W WRITING NETWORK

RATIONALE

Recent studies such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress report and the Scholastic Aptitude Test have shown that the writing ability of students has declined over the last fifteen years. In response to the apparent decline in basic communication skills, parents and business people and some educators are encouraging the schools to go "back to the basics" and have led state legislatures to pass laws mandating tests for minimum competency. However, the NAEP findings indicate that the lower scores of 13 and 17 year-olds were not in mechanical writing skills, but in those skills which require the grouping of writing elements together into coherent paragraphs.

Minimum competency testing is only one problem facing the teacher of written composition. The major problem is keeping in touch with the finding of current research in writing and including those findings in their teaching practices. This is the basic problem that underlies the often articulated "barriers to effective teaching of writing: (1) The class is too large to have weekly writing assignments; (2) It takes too long to 'correct' student writing; (3) The students do not know the difference between a subject and a verb so how can they be expected to write." It is to this major problem of communication between the writing researchers and the writing teachers that the CYLUC-W Writing Network will address itself.

The CYLUC-W Writing Network agrees with the conclusion of the National Council of Teachers of English that

> Writing alone does not teach writing to any significant extent. However, writing in conjunction with good teaching will obtain measurably superior results. Motivation, selective criticism, discussion, practical exploration, and revision are the important features of instruction.

The CYLUC-W Writing Network is founded on these basic assumptions:

1. Writing is a basic skill which all students need in order to take their rightful places in society and to receive the satisfaction of expressing their thoughts and feelings.

2. Writing is not effectively taught without a coherent approach in English and language arts classes and support in subjects other than English and language arts.

3. The most effective educational projects are those that integrate research with practical application and that provide interaction among classroom teachers and other professional educators who are trained in the specific area(s).

PURPOSE

The major purpose of the Writing Network is the improvement of writing instruction in school districts of the CYLUC-W Consortium. The immediate focus is on the establishment of objectives for evaluating the writing of sixth- and eighth-grade students who will soon be tested under the provisions of the current "assessment of Basic Skills" legislature in South Carolina. The first project of the CYLUC-W Writing Skills Network will be to produce a "Writing Manual," listing the writing objectives selected by the Writing Committee of the State Department and appropriate testing situations for each objective. The manual could also include teaching techniques appropriate for instruction in the basic skills area. Another project under consideration is the production of a newsletter to be sent to each school for posting so that lines of communication between the Writing Liaison Committee and each school will be kept opened. The newsletter would also serve to keep individual schools informed of writing programs, activities, and projects being implemented in the CYLUC-W Consortium. The editorial and printing responsibilities will be rotated among the nine units of the CYLUC-W Consortium beginning with Winthrop College in September, 1979.

In order to fulfill these purposes the CYLUC-W Writing Skills Network will meet once each month during the school year.

ORGANIZATION

The Writing Network within the CYLUC-W Consortium shall consist of the following major units: a Writing Network Liaison Committee and a Local Writing Task Force in each cooperating school district (See Appendix A for organizational chart),

WRITING NETWORK LIAISON COMMITTEE (WRITING COMMITTEE)

Responsibilities

1. To communicate local school district needs to the Writing Committee.

2. To identify immediate and long-range priorities and actions of the Writing Committee.

3. To communicate Writing Committee plans to local school districts.

4. To facilitate implementation of approved Writing Committee plans in their local school districts.

5. To keep informed about the current research in the teaching of writing and to develop ways of implementing these findings in their local school districts.

Membership

The Writing Network Liaison Committee shall consist of a minimum of nine and a maximum of twenty-seven members.

1. One to three members of the writing staff at Winthrop College (to include the English education specialist), to be appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. The Dean of the School of Education may wish to appoint a representative of the elementary education language arts program.

2. One to three representatives from each of eight cooperating districts, to be appointed by the District Superintendents.

For the first year, a Winthrop College writing staff member shall serve as Chairperson of the Writing Network Liaison Committee. Within that period, members of the Writing Committee shall determine procedures for selecting, and the length of term for, the Chairperson. The Writing Committee may wish to arrange procedures for insuring that the committee represents the full-range of writing skills taught in the public schools and for insuring the continuity of membership.

Criteria for Membership

In an effort to build from strength, members appointed to the Writing Network Liaison Committee shall meet two criteria.

1. Those selected should have a personal commitment to the improvement of writing instruction which has been reflected in previous and/or current professional activities and in teaching activities. If possible district representatives to the Winthrop Writing Skills Project should be given first consideration in selection for membership to the Writing Network Liaison Committee.

2. Those selected should have expressed a willingness to serve on the Writing Network Liaison Committee for a minimum of one year.

LOCAL WRITING TASK FORCE (TASK FORCE)

Responsibilities

1. To communicate individual school needs to the Task Force.

2. To identify immediate and long-range priorities and actions of the Task Force.

3. To communicate Task Force plans to individual schools.

4. To facilitate implementation of approved Task Force plans in individual schools.

5. To serve as a communication link between local schools and the Writing Committee.

Membership

Local Writing Task Force membership shall be determined by the Superintendent in each district. The following suggested guidelines are offered for consideration by the District Superintendent in selection of the Local Task Force members.

Ideally, membership in the Local Writing Task Force should include:

1. all educational levels within the district, especially from grades 3 to 12;

2. all schools within the district;

3. administrative, supervisory, and instructional personnel; and

4. parents and other members of the community, e.g., the advisory council.

Representatives appointed to the Writing Network Liaison Team should be involved in the Local Writing Task Force. Also important for the effective functioning of the Local Writing Task Force is the selection of individuals committed to the improvement of writing instruction.

Appendix A

CYLUC-W CONSORTIUM: WRITING NETWORK
ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE